

JOHN POINTER'S COLLECTION OF INSECTS

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John Pointer, Oxford graduate, author, antiquary, deacon, priest, and chaplain to Merton College from 1693 to 1722, gave his collection of coins, works of art, plants, animal skeletons, dried birds, shells, fossils, minerals, drugs, etc., to St. John's College, because as he said, "There being such a Collection of Curiosities in this College already, has induc'd me to bequeath my own Collection to be added to it, hoping it may be a Maintenance (or at least a Help towards one) for some young Scholar in shewing 'em; a Scholar to be appointed by the President, to whom he shall administer an Oath to keep all Things safe." Included in the collection were twenty-eight groups of "insects with wings" and eleven of "insects without wings."

In Pointer's descriptive "Catalogue of the Musaeum Pointerianum" (c. 1740), which Dr. R. T. Gunther has incorporated in his book "Early Science in Oxford" (Vol. III, Oxford, 1925), the list is as follows. Insects with wings—"Bees; Wasps; Hornet, or Great Wasp; Humble-bees; the Musk-fly; Flesh-fly, *Musca carnivora*; Horse-fly, *Musca Equina*; Ox-fly; Great-dragon-flies, or Water-butter Flies; Water-flies; the Gnat, *Culex*; Butterflies; the Day-Butterflies; Glow-worm, *Cicindela*; Grasshopper, *Cicada*; Cricket, *Gryllus*; the Cricket, called the Mole-cricket; Moths call'd *Blattae*; *Cantharides* or Spanish Flies; Beetles, call'd by Latins *Scarabaei*; the Bright-blew-colour'd Beetle; the Long-smooth-scarabaeus; the little Green-scarabaeus; Small-chafers; the Oyl-beetle or Water-beetle, *Proscarabaeus*; Earwig, *Auricularia* or *Fullo*; Chinese-flies; the Stag-fly, of the Beetle-kind." Insects without wings—"Silk-worms, *Bombyces*; Other Smooth Caterpillars; Hairy-caterpillars; *Staphylinus*; the *Scolopendrae*; *Millepedes*, *Aselli*, Ang. Sows or Hog-lice; Spiders, *Araneae*; Ants; a Water-worm; an Earth-worm; Snails." Each name is followed by an account, describing in

part, the appearance or habits of the species and these are so interesting and quaint that several are quoted.

“Hornet, or Great Wasp. Their Tails are arm’d with such a Venemous Sting that they will kill a Horse, *Ut ter novenis ictibus Hominem, imò Equum interficiant*, says Moufet. *Spicula Carbonum asperrima*, says Virgil.”

“Humble-bees, call’d by the Germans Hummel, from the Humming noise they make, and Bees of little use, therefore the old Grecians used to call a useless Fellow.”

“The Musk-fly, a diminutive Bee yielding a strong Perfume like that of a Musk; found in Buckingham-shire. Another sort like a large *Cantharides* with long Horns.”

“The Gnat, *Culex*. A very mischievous little Animal, that annoys men both Day & Night, both with its shril noise & sharp Sting, especially those y^t live near Fens & Rivers. He has 2 Wings, great for y^e bigness of his Body, 6 crooked scrambling Legs, with w^{ch} he lifts up his Body wth more ease. He has a long Body, & a Proboscis 3 times longer than those of Common Flies, with a Sharp Point to break thro’ the Skin, & fistulous to suck y^e Blood. There are 3 Sorts, bigger, lesser, middlemost, & least. The Least Sort are the most stinging, here in England; but in the America they are very Large & so Stinging that they will pierce thro’ very thick cloathing. This little Insect has vast Spawn, sometimes above an inch long & $\frac{1}{2}$ a Quarter Diameter (in w^{ch} the Eggs are neatly laid.”

“The Bright-blew-colour’d Beetle; this Beetle in August is troubled with Lice hanging between its Legs, & at last kill’d by them. This may be call’d the Louzy-Beetle.”

“*Staphylinus* is another Insect w^{ch} Moufet reckons among the Caterpillars, tho’ I am rather inclin’d to think it a Beetle, both from its shape & colour, being of a shining Black, only y^e Body is slender & longer, & it commonly walks with his Tail cock’d up, especially when provok’d, & then it emits some excrement out of its Tail. Aristotle says it will poison a Horse if eaten by him: but how so small an Insect that is not so thick as ones Little Finger Shou’d poison so large a Beast, I cannot tell.”

Pointer’s interests were quite varied. In 1713 he wrote “An Account of a Roman pavement lately found at Stunsfield,

Oxfordshire" and when it was adversely criticized, he replied by publishing testimonials. His other writings include a "Chronological History of England," 1714-16; "A Rational Account of the Weather," 1723; "Roman Antiquities in Britain," 1724; "Britannia Triumphans," 1743, dealing with naval victories over the Spanish; "Miscellanea in usum juventutis Academicæ," 1718, and "Oxoniensis Academia, or the Antiquities and Curiosities of the University of Oxford," 1749.